

Still the City on the Hill? Discussing America's Global Future

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One of the (very few) risks in academic life is that we develop a kind of tunnel vision: spend too long in the silos of our own research, and we can lose track of the bigger picture, neglecting to think about the major issues and debates that drew us into research in the first place. It's a risk that exists even in a collegiate, policy-focused centre like ICSA. Our answer? The ICSA Grand Strategy Seminar Series. Since January, we've been getting together on a regular basis with colleagues from across the Policy Institute to discuss the most pressing issues in international affairs. This week's topic was America's future in the world. A few hundred words of blog can't very well hope to cover everything we discussed in ninety-odd minutes of debate, but I've distilled a few key thoughts below. (For a more comprehensive view of our discussions through the year, check out the [ICSA website](#)).

An Unavoidable Question

America's trajectory in international affairs has been a recurring theme in all of our 'grand strategy' seminars. Whether we've been discussing the rise of China or the Arab states' crises, we've constantly found ourselves circling back to the same core questions. Is American power in decline? Does the United States still have the same will to commit forcefully beyond its borders? Are there still grand organising principles at work in American foreign policy, or is President Obama's throwaway line ("Don't do stupid stuff") now the sum of U.S. government strategy? Presidents Kennedy and Reagan each drew on the biblical image of a city on a hill to convey something of their vision for America in the world. The country was to be a shining example to humanity, the first and truest bastion of human liberty and progress. Few American politicians would today question the premises of American Exceptionalism as traditionally formulated, but something of the idealistic fire of previous generations seems to have disappeared. Throughout the world, from Eastern Europe to the Middle-East to the Asia-Pacific,

governments are feeling less and less certain of American intentions and American capabilities. It's becoming the unknown quantity in almost every issue in international relations.

Bringing Tocqueville to Bear

The nineteenth century French writer Alexis de Tocqueville is seldom quoted in the context of international affairs. But in seeking to get to the heart of America's present and future position in the world, we found ourselves having to consider the nation's domestic politics – and venturing into this territory one is never too far away from a reference to *Democracy in America*. We found Tocqueville to have been remarkably percipient in identifying the risks inherent in the successful ascent of a democracy to greatness:

‘All the passions which are most fatal to republican institutions spread with an increasing territory, while the virtues which maintain their dignity do not augment in the same proportion’

The challenge envisaged here is that of political decay, stemming from the passage of time and the entrenchment of party, class and dynastic interests (the ‘capture by insiders’ issue). Opinion differed as to the scope and scale of the problem, but it was fairly widely agreed that gerrymandering of constituencies, resulting in swathes of solidly Republican or Democratic districts, had had a detrimental effect on the House of Representatives: most political competition now emanates from within one's own party, and *cross-party cooperation in the legislature has slumped* as a result. The consequences for American foreign policy are manifold: inertia prevents initiative, domestic and isolationist impulses predominate, and the vaunted benefits of republican democracy are tarnished in the eyes of the world.

And yet... having tested the bounds of pessimism, we nevertheless found President Clinton's great line still to ring true: ‘There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America’. The capacity still exists, within the constitution and the democratic engagement of the American people, to enact small but effective

reforms. One suggestion was that the period between the presidential election and his (or her?) taking office be reduced. By such small steps could democracy be reinvigorated.

Back to Basics

Pessimism is easy. For example, it's often assumed that demography will be key to success in the 21st century, and that the world belongs to hyper-populous China and India. Yet there are other fundamentals in which the US has somewhat of an edge over its putative rivals. In practical terms the United States can be pretty well self-sufficient (or at least highly secure) in its food supply, has adequate long-term water security, and should be able to rely on shale gas and associated resources to maintain energy independence until new sources (e.g. wind, solar and nuclear) come on-stream. These are advantages that future competitor states such as India and China don't yet have. There's also the incumbency advantage: the United States is still the global reserve currency, and English is still the most globalized of languages. The BRICs may have plenty of grounds for optimism, but the ascent to greatness on the global stage will require the expenditure of vast amounts of political and economic capital. Reinvigoration, on the other hand, could be relatively easily achieved: perhaps America does still have an advantage. Bringing the seminar to a close, I asked for a show of hands: who here feels optimistic about America's future in the world? Almost immediately, every hand was raised.